

# TOWARDS DELIVERY AND DIGNITY: COMMUNITY STRUGGLE FROM KENNEDY ROAD<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was researched between 5 November 2005 and concluded on 12 December 2005. Since its completion *Abahlali* has grown significantly in terms of its support within the settlements, its expansion into rural areas, the inner city and various townships and its local, national and international media presence. All commentators seem to agree that it is now the largest social movement in the country.

<sup>2</sup> For the opportunity to research and write this project I am thankful to the people of the Kennedy Road settlement, especially Thembiso Bhengu, System Cele, Derrick Gwala and S'bu Zikode. Many thanks also to Richard Pithouse and Jeanette Park, for their edits, advice, and encouragement.

'Now that we're protesting, our voice is heard . . . our struggle is the voice of silent victims . . . we hadn't been able to talk before'  
- System Cele

## Introduction

When it assumed leadership in 1994, the African National Congress and its ruling alliance partners encouraged a policy of demobilisation for the very organisations that, via mass-mobilisation, had helped bring them into power. After a period of relative quiet, many of the same people who had fought against apartheid took to the streets again in the mass-movements that have emerged post-apartheid, protesting the policies of the new, African-led government. The grievances of these movements range from frustration with government inaction on HIV/AIDS to the evictions of the poor who cannot pay rent, but all express frustration with how little the circumstances of the poor have changed with the 'new dispensation',<sup>3</sup> and bring their frustrations to the state.<sup>4</sup> One of the more recent 'movements' began with large protests from Durban's Kennedy Road settlement against their local councilor, which then inspired and grew into *Abahlali baseMjondolo*<sup>5</sup> (AbM), an organisation of shack-dwellers. Through AbM, the scope and participation of the movement have increased dramatically over the past year, garnering significant media attention and winning small concessions from the Durban municipal government. The topic of Kennedy Road is important beyond the demands this movement makes or the tactics it employs, however, for what it represents: a thrust for 'bottom-up democracy'<sup>6</sup> in a country whose leaders are being criticised increasingly for highly-centralised control<sup>7</sup> and a directed, public articulation of the grievances of the poor.

This paper explores how the people of the Kennedy Road settlement understand themselves, their movement, its goals and tactics, and its relationship to the state and to the struggle against apartheid. To understand these connections, this project also explores the origins of the *Abahlali* movement (and how these origins are remembered) and the sustaining culture and networks that the movement has spawned. Thus, the guiding questions to be answered are simply 'why did a movement arise from Kennedy Road?' and 'how has this movement been sustained?' But because this movement, as are most, is sustained by many of the

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<sup>3</sup> South Africans use this phrase to describe the period since 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Ballard, Richard *Globalisation, Marginalisation and New Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. 2003. These movements bring their grievances primarily to the state, instead of some other party. For contrast, take many labour movements, whose primary target is factory owners or company executive boards.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, 'the people who live in the shacks'.

<sup>6</sup> In Habermas' sense of a broad, participatory forum whereby those at the 'bottom' are able to give their input and a decision is reached on which those in authority act.

<sup>7</sup> Thabo Mbeki, a Man of Two Faces'. *The Economist*, 20 January 2005.

same things that produced them, particular focus will be made on its beginnings – on people’s frustrations, on how these turned into action, and on the feelings and gains that resulted.

In explaining the origins of social movements, scholars generally cite the ‘political opportunities’ afforded to movements by the state, the ‘mobilising mechanisms’ that movements employ, or the manner in which they ‘frame’ their grievances as the critical factor in successful mobilisation.<sup>8</sup> With Kennedy Road and AbM, all three of these explanatory factors play a role in successful mobilisation, in line with an emerging consensus amongst theorists of social movements. Thus the task is not to identify *which* of these factors mobilised people, but rather the *way in which* their interplay gave rise to a movement.

At Kennedy Road, the movement began with a convergence of people’s frustration over a series of events which they saw as broken promises from the Durban municipal government. These frustrations then converged through the mass-meetings the community holds, and were mobilised through the elected formal leadership structure as well as through the informal friendship and kinship networks within and beyond the settlement. The movement has been sustained, though, not only by the power of people’s frustrations, but by a democratic, consultative culture that involves as many people as possible in its decisions – what some call ‘bottom-up democracy’. Interestingly, this bottom-up democracy couples with a strong culture of leadership, and some twenty or thirty committed leader-activists work hard to preserve the consultative culture of the community and of the movement. Additionally, important in the movement’s beginnings and maintenance is the ‘framing process’,<sup>9</sup> where the settlement has movingly voiced its grievances in contrast to the state’s promises. These framings have consolidated support for the movement within the Kennedy Road settlement, attracted the solidarity and partnership of other settlements, and have fueled sympathetic media coverage, taking the movement to a national and international audience. Critically, the movement has also linked productively with academics and professionals, whose media-skills, legal interventions and strategic advice have kept the movement alive and have brought it broader audiences and access to networks of resources.

In this paper, I will retrace a history of the AbM movement through the accounts people gave in their interviews and through a collection of newspaper articles written as the protests began. The body of this paper will then present my findings from interviews and observation, sketching a ‘geography’ of the movement. In a section on movement origins, we turn back to reexamine the events charted in the background section through the eyes of the people living at Kennedy Road,

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<sup>8</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Snow, David and Robert D. Benford ‘Master Frames and Cycles of Protest’. 1992.

trying to understand how and why they ‘broke with authority’<sup>10</sup> and took their grievances to the streets. Here too we begin to see the structures or ‘mobilising mechanisms’ that initially ‘got people out of their shacks’<sup>11</sup> and have brought sustained, broad-based support. As with their mobilising structures, the ways that the movement framed their frustrations and cause has been important in gathering support from other shacks-dwellers, from academics, and from media, and this paper will examine the language of the movement and the support it has attracted. As language and culture are intimately intertwined, examining language will build to an evaluation of the ‘culture of struggle’, the operating norms of the *Abahlali* movement, and this culture’s implications for the movement’s future and growth. The paper will conclude by exploring the direction of the movement and its members’ views of institutional politics, including recent negotiations with the municipality around toilets and housing. And because movements are eminently contextual and AbM’s context is South Africa, engaging with institutional politics also asks the question of engagement with the ‘first struggle’, and the paper will thus explore people’s understanding of the connections between the fight against apartheid and the shack-dwellers’ movement.

### **A brief history of the Kennedy Road struggle**

Kennedy Road first vaulted into the public eye when approximately 700 people from the settlement blocked Umgeni Road for four hours on a Saturday morning, March 21<sup>st</sup>. Traffic was completely blocked as people burned tires they had brought along with them and chanted and sang until the police dispersed them with teargas and dogs, arresting 14 on charges of public violence. Newspapers and television carried news of the protests and the arrests through the weekend, and for some, this was when Kennedy Road began, or at least when it came into view. In fact, the settlement has existed for at least thirty years, an entirely African settlement in the Indian neighborhood of Clare Estate, but most of this history is not documented anywhere outside of people’s memories and the few newspaper articles<sup>12</sup> that have been written about it since the protests.

As with most informal settlements, many of the residents of Kennedy Road come from more rural areas to the city, and stay in the settlements, building a shack (on which there are no taxes) or renting one that someone else has built. This feature would paint the settlement as a transitional space, where people come only temporarily, in hopes of getting a job and then a formal house to which they bring their family from more rural areas. But even a quick visit reveals that this settlement

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<sup>10</sup> This is Fanon’s term, quoted in Gibson, Nigel. *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*. 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with System Cele. 11 Nov 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Pithouse’s ‘Coffin for the Councilor’ reviews the key events in the settlement in the year since the road blockade.

is full of families and thousands of children, not just adult migrant labourers. Many of these families talk of having come to look for better schools, and because their children can now attend schools in this (mostly Indian) neighborhood that have opened up to African children with the end of school segregation, some residents suggest that this precipitated the demographic shift in the settlement from mostly migrant labourers to entire families. For these reasons, the settlement is a hopeful place: near to town and to employment, near schools where children can learn English, and in a middle-class neighborhood where even casual employment out pays anything available in most rural areas.

But despite these conditions of access and the hope which they bring, the settlement is visibly filled with material deprivation.<sup>13</sup> In a project that I organised with System Cele, children and youth wrote letters to the mayor of Durban and to President Mbeki, and their letters always told of this deprivation. People do not have real houses, but cardboard and mud shacks built onto a hillside next to a dump that smells, they said, and when it rains the floors of the shacks are wet and muddy, and they slip inside of their own homes. Neither do they have water, or adequate toilets, they wrote, but most of all they wrote about electricity. Because few of the shacks are connected to electricity, the residents use paraffin lamps and candles to study and to see at night, but because their houses are made of cardboard and are built so close together, when one candle tips over fifteen shacks can burn. Cele decided that the pamphlet should be called *'We are Crying'*, and this tells the story of the rest of the letters.

Not all of the conditions the children wrote of or people speak of have come directly from under-development, though. Micah Kweyama lamented that living at Kennedy Road was 'like hostel-style, it's not safe to bring your family here', and many of the children wrote with fear of 'big men' and rape. There are visible problems of alcoholism, and people report that they live in constant fear of crime<sup>14</sup> – both of these they attribute to the high rate of unemployment. But what people speak of most are the need for land and housing.

In their words, over the years, the municipality has extended all variety of promises to the community, to improve the conditions here – from simply promising to clean the toilets to promising to build them formal houses. One ANC bulletin from right after it won the province for the first time in 1999<sup>15</sup> lists Kennedy Road specifically as a place to target for housing upgrades, and another earlier announcement invites Kennedy Road specifically to come to a meeting to talk to Nelson Mandela in 1993 about their housing problem – 'your problem is my

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<sup>13</sup> Pithouse, Richard 'Coffin for the Councilor'. 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Derrick Gwala and Themiso Bhengu were careful to include the government in some of the blame for the crime problem, saying that the police won't come and do their job.

<sup>15</sup> African National Congress 'ANC KwaZulu-Natal Victory Statement', 4 June 1999

problem, your solution is my solution'.<sup>16</sup> So the hope for and expectation of housing here is not new. The stories people tell of this hope for housing and their relationship with the government are laced with words like 'broken promises' and with feelings of betrayal, and these stories as motivation for their protests will be examined thoroughly in the body of this paper. Whether Nelson Mandela's meeting planned to build houses where the shacks are now or anywhere in Clare Estate, the neighborhood the settlement is located in, is unclear. More recently, the municipality has told the settlement that 'this place has been identified and prioritised for relocation. It is ringfenced for slum clearance . . . the city's plan is to move you to the periphery',<sup>17</sup> as a part of a new slum-clearance policy they appear to have embraced in the run-up to the 2010 World Cup. That policy<sup>18</sup> is essentially to build current shack-dwellers housing in the more rural periphery of the city, but has enjoyed little popularity amongst the residents of the shacks themselves. The chronology as to when they have been promised the land that they occupy or pieces of adjacent land for the construction of houses versus when they have been threatened with forced relocation is unclear. Likely there have been both at different times. In short, though, residents said that they took to the road to protest when they found out that land along Elf Road, a nearby road, which they had been promised in meetings with their local councilor and with the department of housing as recently as February of 2005, was instead leased to a company to build a brickyard on<sup>19</sup> with no warning given or consultation made with the settlement community. After scheduling a meeting with the councilor and the owner of the company only for them not to come, the community met and decided to block the road.

After the road was blocked and the fourteen protesters were arrested, about 1 200 people from the community marched again on the Sydenham police station, demanding that 'if they are criminal we are all criminal'<sup>20</sup> – the police should either release the fourteen or arrest all of them. In Cosmos Ngcobo's<sup>21</sup> account, the police met the marchers at the petrol station on Clare Road, the main road that Kennedy Road turns off of, and blocked them from going any further. A delegation of five were allowed to continue to the police station, of which he was one, but to no avail: the fourteen would not be released. After ten days in Durban's Westville prison and the *pro bono* intervention of a lawyer, the bail for the 14 was reduced to zero and they

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<sup>16</sup> African National Congress. 'Southern Natal Statement on the Housing Crisis', 9 November 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Deputy City Manager Derek Naidoo, quoted in Pithouse, Richard 'Obedience Doesn't Pay: Inside the New Revolt'. 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Grimmet, Neville. 'Slums Clearance Policy'. *eThekwini Online*. Available at [www.durban.org.za](http://www.durban.org.za)

<sup>19</sup> In fact the motivations and events surrounding the road blockade are more complex, and are examined at length in the 'Mounting Frustration, Movement Motivations' section.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Pithouse, Richard 'Obedience Doesn't Pay: Inside the New Revolt'. 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Interviewed 4 Dec 2005.

were released to celebrations in the community hall. With the intervention of a second lawyer, the charges were dropped.

Two weeks later, on the May 13<sup>th</sup>, some 3 000 people from Kennedy Road together with members of five other settlements marched on their councilor, Yacoob Baig, to 'demand land, housing, and his immediate resignation'.<sup>22</sup> This march was granted a permit, and no one was arrested. The leaders from Foreman Road who I interviewed did report suspicious tactics leading up the event, though - on the morning of the march they received pamphlets which claimed the march had been organised by the IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) from people they knew were ANC members. Kennedy Road leaders also reported a large, armed military presence at their settlement the night before they were to march. Nonetheless, the march went off successfully, and newspapers and billboards that afternoon read 'Massive Protest Rocks Durban'.<sup>23</sup> From there, Kennedy Road began to form further linkages with other settlements and *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, a movement of shack-dwellers, coalesced as representatives of these settlements began meeting together.

Several months later, on 14 September 5000 - some estimated as many as 8000 - people from Kennedy Road and its recently aligned partner settlements marched again on their councilor, Yakoob Baig, enacting a mock funeral to say, in Nonhlanhla Mzobe's words, '[Councilor] Baig, you are dead to us',<sup>24</sup> that their ward no longer recognised him as a legitimate authority. Like the marches before it, this insurgence won attention from and access to the municipal leadership, a phenomenon explored in depth in the section on movement directions. In some sign of the way that Kennedy Road has influenced other settlements, on 4 October 2005 Quarry Road, an informal settlement in an adjacent local ward, staged a mock funeral for their councilor as well.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Kennedy Road and AbM are not alone amongst post-apartheid social movements, and many of the grievances which they bring to the state mirror those of their counterparts around the country. As they describe themselves, it is not that they are dissatisfied with the proposition of democracy but rather with the policies where the government seems *not* to represent their interests, what they see as the *undemocratic* workings of some state organs of policy. And, examined carefully, part of what gives rise to these movements is the unfinished business of democratisation. Because though they vote and follow politics religiously, in their words, it never ceases to feel to them as though few in the municipal, provincial, or national government actually have their interests at heart or are willing to engage

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<sup>22</sup> Pithouse, Richard 'Coffin for the Councilor'. 2005.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Interviewed 10 Nov 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Khan, Fazel and Pithouse, Richard 'Another Coffin for Another Durban Councilor: Quarry Road Marches on Jayraj Bachu'. 2005.

with them with openness and respect. So while their causes differ and they draw their support from townships as far apart as Cape Town and Durban, South Africa's new social movements represent a thrust to continue democratisation (beyond the regime change), putting the interests of the majority – who also happen to be the poorest – back on the table.

As Richard Ballard notes, this distinguishes South Africa where, unlike the United States and Great Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s in which the poor were 'rediscovered' by social scientists,<sup>26</sup> the poor have 're-entered the national scene because they have made themselves visible again by their capacity to fight and resist'. When they talk of why they first took to the road in protest, the people at Kennedy Road tell first of the years that they have lived at the settlement and the ways their frustrations have grown, and then of a desire to bring their conditions into public view, to make their voices heard. The point at which they place the beginning of the community's anger with the municipality and the reasons they give for turning this anger to action are varied, but together they give a strong sense that, in the eyes of its members, this movement is driven by grievances – with years of promises unfulfilled, with the material deprivation of life in the settlement, and by the indignity of being relocated to a rural periphery away from all the things that they need and want. But the 'frame' that they have employed, as S'bu Zikode reminded me,<sup>27</sup> is simply one of trying to tell the truth – that their councilor Baig has lied, that this is what it is like to live in a shack, and that land, housing, basic services, and respect are what they want and will demand.

### **Mounting frustration and motivations toward action**

In interviews, it was interesting to see when people pinpointed the beginnings of the community's dissatisfaction and where these frustrations were directed – to the councilor, with the municipality, etc. – and the people I interviewed each responded differently. What every interview revealed, though, was that frustration with their councilor, with the municipality and the departments of housing, water and sanitation were nothing new.

Asked when the community first became frustrated with the municipality, different people gave different answers – of those who had only been in leadership for a year or two or who had not lived at Kennedy Road as long, most said that the people simply became angry on the day or the week leading up to when they blocked the freeway. In their words, until then, the community had tried to make their voice heard via meetings with municipal authorities; when it became clear that they had been 'bluffed' by their councilor over a piece of land they had been

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<sup>26</sup> Ballard, Richard 'Globalisation, Marginalisation and New Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa'. 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Personal Interview 6 November 2005.



promised, they got angry. For those who have lived in the settlement and were involved in leadership for longer, the day when they blocked the road was a major turning point in terms of attitudes and tactics. But these people's answers drew from more history and painted a picture of mounting frustration – over the municipality's failed promises, but also over the manner in which the community was treated, and how decisions were made without consulting them.

Nonhlanhla Mzobe, who has lived in the settlement since her childhood, spoke of the hope that people felt initially for getting houses after the new government came to power in 1994. Around that time, 'you could go and meet the housing officials ... and the first time, all the comrades [in the housing department] were disciplined, but then they would say the next time that you went that the man [you met before] wasn't there'.<sup>28</sup> As she tells it, frustration with the unwillingness of the local government to hear their concerns began there.

M'du Ngqulunga,<sup>29</sup> now the deputy chairperson of the development committee, speaks of different events around the same time. Asked when and why he first felt motivated to go and protest the councilor, he recalled all the way back to 'when I first came here in 1993, the Urban Foundation<sup>30</sup> came here and promised us that we can just stay here and showed us [how to upgrade] the places that we had, all these measurements and things. They insisted that we shouldn't accept it if anyone else might come to say that this land is for someone else . . . when we stayed here the housing department used to come and promise us that they're going to build us houses, this year, then this year, then they came and told us that the land is unstable for building, and that the [closeness to] the dump sight might cause harmful effects on people', extending his frustration beyond just the local councilor and his recent failures to the whole municipality and the Department of Housing.

Anton Zamisa<sup>31</sup> puts the beginning of the committee's frustration with the municipality as more recent, in October of 2003, when the Kennedy Road development committee under S'bu Zikode's new leadership organised a clean-up campaign, only for the Department of Health to give them no financial or logistical support. M'du Ngqulunga also remembered this as a turning point in our second interview. Here, they implied, the community was not waiting for the councilor or for the municipality to come and bring development, but they were organising themselves to address problems in the community<sup>32</sup> – in this case, trash – and all

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<sup>28</sup> Personal Interview with Nonhlanhla Mzobe. 10 Nov 2005.

<sup>29</sup> A twelve year resident of Kennedy Road. Interviewed through Thembiso Bhengu, 16 Nov 2005.

<sup>30</sup> An NGO set up by South African businesses to show that private sector-led development would be more efficient. Pithouse, Richard 'Coffin for the Councilor: A report on the emergence of a shack dwellers movement in Durban, South Africa'. 2005.

<sup>31</sup> A professional marathon runner and 12-year resident of Kennedy Road, interviewed 28 Nov 2005.

<sup>32</sup> This was not the only time that the community organised itself to address problems. In her November 8<sup>th</sup> interview, Nonhlanhla Mzobe tells of the crèche that she started because she saw so many children at

they needed the municipality to do was to come and collect the waste they collected along with that of their neighbors. And when the municipality gave nominal support to the project, but then refused to collect the bags they had collected because they were not in the proper bags (given only to taxpayers), said Ngqulunga, 'this was what mobilised us to voice our concerns to the waste department'.<sup>33</sup> From there, he said, the committee had meetings with the municipal housing department, who told them that they would build in the areas around the settlement, emphasising that 'they came here and made all these promises!'

Words like 'promises' and 'betrayal' from the councilors and from other members of the municipal government became themes in all of the narratives my interviewees told, while the number and the scope of these promises and disappointments depended on how long the person had been at Kennedy Road and how much they wanted to talk about it. As the people of Kennedy Road tell it, these promises, especially around the time of elections, have been a theme in the life and hopes of their community, but after votes were tallied, the promises remained unfulfilled and hope gave way to disillusionment and then frustration.

Importantly, many of the interviewees remember the names and affiliations of each of the people who had promised them each thing and often remember the exact dates that these things were promised, even five or six years later. This exactness lends veracity to their recollections and thus to their grievances, but it seems also to show the direction of their frustration – towards each of these individuals, and not to a system as a whole.

### **From frustration to action – and how we talk about it**

While such promises left unfulfilled were nothing new to the community, people often said to me, disillusionment gradually gave way to frustration and then to anger until, this past March, everything changed. Frustration spilled into anger over a piece of land along nearby Elf Road which the community had been promised for the construction of homes, when it became clear to them that their local councilor was not only slow to fulfill his promises, but that he had lied to them outright.

A few weeks before, their elected councilor, Yakoob Baig had promised them in a meeting with the development committee and with officials from the municipality that the adjacent land would be used for developing land. So, says

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home alone. Later she was also involved in setting up a drop-in center that cares for child-headed households and people living with HIV/AIDS. The drop-in-centre has enjoyed some government support.

<sup>33</sup> Mdu Ngqulunga, interviewed through Thembiso Bhengu again on 24 Nov 2005. Note he did not include all of the people working for the waste department, though, or for the municipality. He qualified his criticism by adding that some from the waste department had borrowed trucks secretly and come to pick up their trash secretly.

Mzobe, 'when we saw the *ganda ganda*<sup>34</sup> [bulldozers] working down there, we were first happy, but then we thought 'if they were building houses for us, why wouldn't they tell us?''<sup>35</sup>

In interviews I questioned people thoroughly on what exactly had happened in the days leading up to when they burned tires and blocked the road, and what it was that they were hoping this would accomplish. Where other events in the history of the settlement were described differently and even in contradictory terms by different interviewees, it was striking how completely similar their recollection and descriptors were for that week in March.

In the recollection of Derrick Gwala,<sup>36</sup> S'bu Zikode,<sup>37</sup> and of Mondli Mbiko,<sup>38</sup> and nearly every other person that I interviewed (though it was in these interviews that I pressed this point the most), the week went exactly this way: Seeing the men working down on their 'promised land',<sup>39</sup> just one month after it had been promised to them, they were initially excited but then suspicious – as Nonhlanhla Mzobe put it 'why would they build us houses without telling us anything?' After walking down to talk to the men operating the bulldozers down the hill and finding out that the men were building a brickyard for the Greystone Company, the community became outraged at what they saw as a complete betrayal. After the committee met to discuss things, they decided to hold a mass meeting, and announced with a loudspeaker that there would be a meeting in the hall. In Mbiko's words, 'we [the leadership committee] asked the people, 'what are you thinking about the councilor?' and the community said 'we must march!' The committee then held a caucus meeting and gave the go-ahead for the march'. When I pressed him, Zikode said that the people most strongly in favour of the march were the youth, but that the community had reached the decision together, and that it was the voice of the community that was being followed. Putting the same question to others that I interviewed, no one could remember who had originally suggested that they demonstrate, instead saying that the community had decided together. Committee members emphasise that this decision was taken only after their councilor, municipal officials and the owner of the company building the brickyard did not come to a meeting they had scheduled, after they called them repeatedly, perhaps to emphasise just how far they followed all of the proper channels before creating a channel of their own.

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<sup>34</sup> Zulu for bulldozers.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Nonhlanhla Mzobe, 10 November 2005.

<sup>36</sup> A shopkeeper, gospel singer, and committee member. Interviewed 24 Nov 2005 through System Cele

<sup>37</sup> Chairperson of the Kennedy Road Development Committee. Interviewed 1 Dec 2005

<sup>38</sup> A print-maker and development committee treasurer (though he jokes that this isn't a difficult job as they don't have any money). Interviewed 25 Nov 2005

<sup>39</sup> Members of the community also use this phrase consistently, referring to the land on Elf Road.

Considering why people's recollections of the events of that week were so similar, even to the point of using the same wording and emphasising the same points when other events were remembered differently by different people, more salient explanations have occurred to me over time. Initially, I suspected that they might all tell the same story and emphasise so carefully that the community made the decision together – that it was the 'voice of the community' – because if they were to pinpoint any one individual or even group, he or she would be at risk of prosecution or targeting from the police. Indeed this may be a part of the reason, but two more salient explanations have occurred to me since then. The first centers on the importance of this week in the life and attitudes of the community. Every person whom I interviewed – from high school students to seasoned community leaders to grannies unable to even attend the marches – pointed to this week as the point when everything changed for Kennedy Road – when the community finally made its voice heard. Accordingly, because this week was so important to them it is etched firmly into people's minds, and they thus recount it more accurately than other events that fade and blur. But even here people probably would not use so many of the same phrases and emphasise the same events – this, I think, reveals something about the way that the community functions. As the decision to demonstrate was taken so carefully with meetings held twice by the committee and once with the whole community, so were the events of that week reviewed carefully. After a recent march at Foreman Road, I witnessed Zikode lead a meeting at which participants carefully evaluated the entire day, what had gone right and what had gone wrong. Similarly, the day when they blocked the road was likely to have been even more carefully reviewed and discussed, in meetings and in conversations – because the people I met at Kennedy Road talk about their struggle all the time. It seems like that a common understanding and a common narrative was reached through the careful discussion and reflection at these meetings.

### **Mobilising structures: Legitimacy through democracy**

If the way that people speak in similar terms of the process leading up to their blocking the road gives glimpses of the participatory organisational culture of the settlement, hearing people recount one of their community meetings confirms what these glimpses hint at: the community is thoroughly democratic, at several levels. These democratic organs brought people's frustrations together for a unified action, and served to mobilise the community towards a common goal.

Most conventionally democratic is the way in which the community elects their development committee every year, calling anyone in the community who would come for what they call a 'mass meeting', to nominate people for different positions on the committee and then to vote. Hundreds of people gather in the community hall, and people voice their opinions of the old leadership and nominate new potential members of the development committee, who can then decline or

accept. Community members are nominated for the key leadership positions – chairperson, secretary, and seconds to each of these posts – and the community votes on them. People are then nominated to at-large positions, and those receiving the most votes receive positions on the committee.

Mzobe said the committee began years ago, with ‘my granny and the old *babas* (fathers) calling a meeting under the tree to talk about things’,<sup>40</sup> but has adopted its current form only under the leadership of S’bu Zikode. Without fail, everyone I talked to in the community held the committee in deep respect, and admired individually the people on it – especially its main three leaders, Zikode, Mzobe, and M’du Ngqulunga. Interestingly, Zikode and Derrick Gwala, among others, said that they had not even wanted to be on the committee, but when the people nominated them in the meeting they felt like they had a duty to serve the community.

The internal workings of the committee also struck me for their formality and for their consultative, participatory character. The meetings I observed usually began with a report from the chairperson, but on any given point, the floor would be opened up to the questions and feedback from every person who had something he or she wanted to say. People would give reports back on their ‘portfolios’ – health, safety and security, and others – and no decision I saw was ever put to a vote, as they usually arrived at a consensus. Asked what they have learned from being on the committee, members talked a lot about these things – about the importance of listening to others’ ideas, about leadership, and about the importance of ‘being together’.

Probed closer, though, things were not always this way. In the 1990s, people joked that the committee was run by an *induna*, or unelected headman, who would make people pay him twenty rand before he listened to their problems. For those who remember the time, people said that the committee was timid and poorly run – that they made no protest when the municipality told them they would have to be relocated, that they would never go to meet with the department of housing or anyone in government, and that they never consulted with the broader community or called for new elections (which they now do every year). Mzobe’s explanation of the period is more forgiving – that these leaders were old, and that they were still operating on the apartheid-era mindset of not talking to the government because the government’s position was that the settlement was illegal. Few people thought that this committee had really served the community well, and they talk about now versus then in terms of day and night. Anton Zamisa speaks of when Zikode was

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<sup>40</sup> Interview 10 Nov 2005.

first elected to the committee in 2001<sup>41</sup> in glowing terms: 'I started to see S'bu Zikode, and I thought 'this is a man who knows what he's talking about, I can fight [together] with this guy' . . . S'bu opened our eyes. The committee was not so powerful [before], but this one . . . we talk about straight things, land, housing, electricity'. The committee also talks to the community more than it ever did before, says System Cele, holding mass meetings where they use a loudspeaker to invite everyone to come. Because of these meetings where anyone in the community could voice their ideas or concerns, and because the committee holds such democratic legitimacy, decisions that they make and actions that they choose to take enjoy broader popular support than they could in other structures. Zikode confirms: 'I've learned the importance of support - the committee would not be democratic unless the entire community has given us complete support'.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in consultation with the community, when the committee gave the go-ahead to block the road in March, people turned out by the hundreds.

Telling the story of that week in March, T.N. Lembede<sup>43</sup> said that on the morning of the day when they blocked the road, people went around knocking on each other's doors as early as four in the morning, saying, in System Cele's recollection 'we all need houses, we all must go'.<sup>44</sup> Referring not specifically to this march but to all of the marches they have initiated, Lembede talked about cajoling people that they must not go to work that day - 'only the grannies, pregnant women and disabled can stay behind'. Asked if they thought that this was democratic - this active persuasion did not seem that way to me initially - people usually chuckled and replied that it was, because everyone could freely voice other ideas in the meetings, and that they had elected the committee that called and ran the meetings.<sup>45</sup>

Thus the movement began not only on the power of people's frustrations or anger, but because they had a legitimate, democratic leadership that promoted the whole community's involvement in decision-making. And, as best as it can be reconstructed from oral histories, the real advent of this culture, when Zikode, the most committed evangelist for the importance of democratic consultation, was elected chairperson, coincided with the turning points that people point to in the history of the community. First, when the committee started talking actively to the municipality in 2001, and then when they organised the clean-up campaign in 2003 after he had been elected again. So while the stories of promises and betrayal are

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<sup>41</sup> Zikode recounted that he was elected for chairperson in 2001 and 2002, but in 2003 when he was elected he declined the position because 'there was too much competition around the position. Personal Interview, 1 Dec 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewed 2 Dec 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Interviewed 11 Nov 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Interviewed 24 Nov 2005.

<sup>45</sup> It should be noted though that those who don't choose to attend marches suffer no coercive pressure. A significant number of people play no role in politics without adverse consequence.

critically important, as are the ways that people moved from feelings of betrayal to anger and action, this action most probably would not have been so calculated or collective without the leadership structure that brought people's feelings together and directed them towards one goal.

### **Protest goals**

Asked what their goal was when they blocked Umgeni road, most interviewees spoke about trying to make their voice heard, and about trying to bring attention to the ways their councilor had failed them. M'du Ngqulunga put it plainly: 'the idea was trying to create something visible, because the councilor had been hiding this thing, we wanted to show the whole world what was going on'.<sup>46</sup> Zanele Mbatha's agreed: 'we had all these meetings and they didn't listen to us. We wanted to show our anger, so we blocked the road'.<sup>47</sup> Others mentioned how people could drive by their settlement without really looking at the conditions in which they live, but when the road was blocked and the news cameras came, people across the country saw that 'this is who we are. This is what we want'.<sup>48</sup> System Cele confirms: 'before, S'bu [Zikode's] committee had several meetings but their voice was not heard . . . now that we're protesting, our voice is heard ... our struggle is the voice of silent victims ... we hadn't been able to talk [before]'. Reflecting on that and other protests, S'bu Zikode likes to say that 'we have been encouraged by our municipality that the Zulu language cannot be understood by our officials, Xhosa cannot be understood, Sotho cannot be understood – even English cannot be understood. The only language that they understand is us getting into the street. We have seen the result and we have been encouraged'.<sup>49</sup>

Like Zikode, many people in the settlement, particularly those involved with the recent negotiations with different departments in the municipality, have developed a more strategic picture of that day – that the councilor and the municipality were embarrassed by the coverage in the media, and that this had given the settlement new negotiating power. Several people mused that now the councilor and even the president can see their suffering on his own TV when he watches the news. In meetings now they talk about mass demonstrations as one of several tools that they possess to deal with the authorities, and this reflects in part how the movement has become more strategic over time. Some even say that they thought this way at the time of the protest, but most report that they initially demonstrated out of anger and a desire to give themselves a voice.

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<sup>46</sup> Interviewed 23 Nov 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Interviewed 24 Nov 2005.

<sup>48</sup> It seems like this phrase was originally Zikode's, but is now used widely.

<sup>49</sup> Interview on 6 Nov 2005. He now repeats it in many of the speeches he makes.

### **From a protest to a movement**

Asked how they felt after the demonstration, people at Kennedy Road expressed initial feelings of confusion over the arrested fourteen, but emphasised that they also felt as though they had power, and that they could be brave. Anton Zamisa simply said that 'before we were afraid, and then we were not afraid'. This was basically the refrain of everyone that I spoke with – that the march had been a big success, and in Zikode's words, that it was the foundation of the struggle that has followed, because it brought people together and showed them that they could take matters into their own hands. This excitement mounted after the charges against the fourteen imprisoned community members were dropped. Nonhlanhla Mzobe said that as soon as they returned, planning began for the next march as they celebrated their return, almost as if to say that as soon as the fourteen returned, they knew they must protest again. In all of my interviews, people spoke of the first protest as the turning point in the community – when they ceased to be afraid, or more pragmatically, when conditions started to change.

And while their goal of housing was not immediately met, direct results were seen: the department of sanitation did clean out several dozen toilets, partially renovated the community hall, including its office and crèche, and promised to come back to finish the job. And though these things were critical, especially the cleaning of the toilets, what this also marked was a change in policy from the municipality – where before, as the people at Kennedy Road saw it, the municipality had basically been pursuing a policy of making conditions unbearable so as to force people to relocate, they were now making concessions that made the place more livable.

With these results and with the new feeling of power, what began as an isolated protest from one settlement grew to a series of protests and negotiations in partnership with other settlements. But always and everywhere, the movement that has followed has born the marks of its birth: frustration with what are seen as government's broken promises told in a straightforward narrative, participatory consultation with all involved, and a democratic leadership. Along with this character, the movement has also been sustained through the linkages it has formed – with other settlements, with sympathetic academics and professionals, and with the news media.

### **Movement linkages – growing beyond Kennedy Road**

#### *Other informal settlements*

Interviewing members of other informal settlements, they too echoed the feeling that seeing Kennedy Road's protest had emboldened them, and that Kennedy Road's grievances had resonated with them. Bheki Mncwango, chairperson of the Jadhu Place committee, also in Councilor Baig's ward, said that he had learned so much from Kennedy Road, that while the councilor was telling lies, he saw that Zikode



and the people at Kennedy Road 'were telling the truth'.<sup>50</sup> People at Kennedy Road now seemed conscious of this too: System Cele put it simply that 'first it was Kennedy Road, now it's all the informal settlements. People are learning from here, it's given them a lesson: you must stand up for what you want'.<sup>51</sup>

From the interaction that I had with other settlements, they too tell similar stories of broken promises and frustration with the councilor, the department of housing, and the ANC. Mnikelo Ndabankulu, a young leader at Foreman Road, often references the Freedom Charter and the ANC election slogans when he speaks: 'the ANC said 'a better life for all', but I don't know, it's not a better life for all, especially if you live in the shacks. We waited for the promises from 1994, up to 2004, that's 10 years of waiting for the promises from the government. If we just sit and wait we'll be waiting forever. We got tired of that, so we started *toyi toying*'. When these settlements heard Kennedy Road's message of frustration with the government, especially with Councilor Baig, and saw films of their conditions, it resonated immediately.

But exactly how was this message communicated? A few people mentioned hearing word of the first protest on the news, or hearing stories of it during bus rides or at their work. Others, like those from Foreman Road, said that they had always known about Kennedy Road (they are about 2 km apart), because the same bus had taken them for ANC rallies. Equally ironic, Bheki Mncwango of Jadhu Place said that he had met Zikode at a class held at the municipality for development committee chairpersons, that Zikode was teaching. Most of the settlements that have since joined mentioned receiving pamphlets about Kennedy Road's next march after hearing news of it through other channels.

William Bogege remembers a film about Kennedy Road that was shown at Foreman in the week leading up to the march in May as a turning point for the settlement's support. Until then, many in his community had been unsure of what was going on at Kennedy Road, but when they saw the film, they wanted to join with Kennedy Road. These settlements' joining would allow them to bring common demands to the municipality as one unified body. For the May march, there were five settlements marching together; when I first started researching Kennedy Road, there were twelve; now people report as many as twenty-four.

Nobody I spoke to could remember exactly when it had started or when it had adopted its name, but everyone said that the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (AbM) leadership committee had come out of meetings between the leaders of different settlements earlier this year. These meetings bore strong resemblance to the committee meetings at Kennedy Road and if anything, they were even more

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<sup>50</sup> Interviewed through Thembisio Bhengu and System Cele, 22 Nov 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Interviewed 11 Nov 2005.

participatory.<sup>52</sup> Representatives of each settlement attended and were told to give reports back to the leadership committees of each of their respective settlements, and then to bring back the feelings of their settlement to the AbM meetings. Meetings were formal, and people were often told – usually jokingly – that they were ‘out of order’ if they spoke of something not being addressed or they spoke over someone else. Here too, while the chair and deputy chair spoke a lot, usually giving updates and summarising what others had said, everyone was given the chance to speak. And speak they did – the meetings would often last more than four hours – but people seemed to enjoy being there, and the many that I spoke with were very proud to be on the committee and involved in the decision-making process. It was clear too that friendships had formed between the representatives of the different settlements and that they had a strong sense of common cause: Senzo, speaking again, said, ‘All who are working are here for development, whether you’re ANC or IFP or whatever, what unites us is housing’.<sup>53</sup> And as with the Kennedy Road Development Committee, in the seven or eight meetings I attended I never witnessed a decision come to a vote, because people kept talking until consensus was reached.

People interviewed at Kennedy Road expected that, as their struggling won concessions from the government, that other settlements would want to join. This struck me as somewhat opportunistic, but everyone I spoke with viewed these links between settlements as critical, and expected that the movement would eventually become very large. Further, people did not seem to view these late-joiners as opportunists – perhaps because they thought that other settlements’ initial skepticism was warranted. If anything, people seemed excited about more settlements joining (at the meetings that I attended, if a new settlement’s representative was there for the first time, people applauded him or her), and people in leadership and on the leadership-periphery at Kennedy Road expected that the movement would soon become national. As with many phrases, ‘the most important thing we have is our unity’ has now become a part of the common vocabulary of the people involved in AbM. With this, the most frequent answers I received to the question of what people had learned from the struggle were ‘I’ve learned that we must be together’ and ‘we are strongest together’. When people answered this way, they were usually referencing the spiritual-psychological assurance of togetherness, but some also said explicitly that they saw the strategic advantage: 6 000 marchers, and even more voters, wielded a lot more bargaining power than would fewer.

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<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, it seems that interaction with Kennedy Road and other *Abahlali baseMjondolo* settlements is producing a wave of democratisation across other settlements. At Foreman Road, the area committee, which had been supporting the councilor because of small patronage that he gave them, is being challenged by a younger leadership doing more work to consult with community members and, with Kennedy Road, are protesting for land and housing. Interview with Richard Pithouse, 4 November 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Meeting 15 Nov 2005 at Juba Place.

Nearly everyone whom I spoke with at Kennedy Road was pleased with the expansion of their protests and negotiations with the municipality to include other settlements, and they voiced faith in the representatives who were designated to go to these meetings. A few suggested that Kennedy Road should continue to meet with the municipality independently, though, not to fast-track housing but to address concerns specific to Kennedy Road – cleaning the pitlatrines and renovating the community hall. They did not seem to think that AbM would patently ignore these concerns, but more practically, that they would be forgotten in big meetings with the mayor where only a few representatives of Kennedy Road would be present. Anton Zamisa put it bluntly: ‘People are shitting outside of my house and it stinks . . . someone at the meeting [with the deputy city manager today] needs to talk about toilets at Kennedy Road, but there are so many people there . . . how will they remember?’<sup>54</sup>

This aside, people were still extremely positive about *Abahlali baseMjondolo* and the work that the settlements were doing together. People seemed proud to live at Kennedy Road, the place where the protests had begun, and they joke that when the police hear that they are from Kennedy Road, they worry and accuse them of inciting everyone else. They also speak of meeting people in taxis and on the streets who talk about having seen them on TV, and sometimes ask them how their settlement can join. A question I put to most everyone I interviewed was whether people at Kennedy Road feared that it would take longer to get houses if they were working with all these other settlements, and that things would slow down, but no one seemed to worry about this. These linkages with other settlements had built feelings of unity and of strength, had been an opportunity to share in each other’s suffering, as System Cele put it, and to capture a strategic advantage via numbers.

### *Involving the middle-class*

In their descriptions of forming these linkages with other settlements, stories of pamphlets and films about Kennedy Road, along with meetings all over the ward reveal an access to resources that has come through another fruitful linkage – with sympathetic academics, a filmmaker, and briefly, with two lawyers. These people have brought advice and skills, including media-savvy, have made strategic interventions and have connected the movement to networks of resources that have helped it grow. Somewhat to my surprise, people at Kennedy Road also held uniformly positive views of this involvement, perhaps because they still felt like they were the owners of the movement.

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<sup>54</sup> Interviewed 24 Nov 2005. Towards the end of my research, toilets started to be cleaned and I saw several cars from the department of welfare coming for meetings about the crèche and about the drop-in center, so I would suspect that people’s fear that concerns specific to Kennedy Road would be lost has now subsided.

Nonhlanhla Mzobe talks of when Richard Pithouse first came to the settlement after they blocked the road and laughs at how initially skeptical they in the settlement were: 'we met Richard [Pithouse], but the people didn't like Richard and they chased him away, but he introduced himself to me. For a while, I was the only one who trusted him, and whenever he would come people would say 'hey Princess, your man is here' or 'your *umlungu* (white person) is here!' But then we started the good relationship and then we met Raj [Patel], and then Fazel [Khan], and the lawyers.<sup>55</sup> Some remembered that their skepticism had eased when they read an article that Pithouse had written about the protest and about the settlement in the newspaper, the first sympathetic article after several that rehashed the police report of accusing them of inciting violence. Through Pithouse, the fourteen arrested settlement members connected to *pro bono* legal counsel from two lawyers, the first reducing their bail to zero - effectively releasing them - and the second getting all charges dropped.<sup>56</sup> Though my interviewees mentioned her less than the lawyers, around the same time Aoibheann O'Sullivan made a film titled *Kennedy Road and the Councillor*, giving a short overview of the Kennedy Road struggle from March to June 2005,<sup>57</sup> and people from other settlements remembered the film as an important mobilising tool.

The people whom I interviewed at Kennedy Road were uniformly positive about the relationships that they had formed, even when some were unclear as to how they had come about.<sup>58</sup> Asked how these relationships had benefited the struggle, people usually began with mention of support with accessing t-shirts and sound equipment, and knowledge of 'how to do *toyi toying* in the right way [without getting people arrested]'. After mentioning being very thankful for these things, interviewees moved in different directions with their responses. Mondli Mbiko went on to say 'they're good people. They're teaching us about leadership . . . [they] take us to the university, [they're] willing to teach us lots of skills. He added, presumably referring to Pithouse, that they 'help expose the government for what they've done to the poor' with radio interviews and newspaper articles. System Cele went even further: 'I really think you all are a miracle from God sent to us'. Only on one day, when a meeting with the mayor was set up amid talk of relocation to Phoenix,

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<sup>55</sup> Interviewed 10 Nov 2005. While she didn't specify, it seemed like the initial skepticism came out the interactions they had had with white people over the years.

<sup>56</sup> Though it did not come up in interviews as often as I expected, this intervention was clearly critical to the resolve of the movement. Around the same time, members of another Durban informal settlement in Cato Manor also mounted protests, but the leaders were arrested and detained and no follow up demonstrations have been reported.

<sup>57</sup> Pithouse, Richard 'Coffin for the Councillor'. 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Anton Zamisa, among several people, thought that the academics, including myself, had all been friends of S'bu Zikode and that he had brought them to Kennedy Road. In his account, Richard Pithouse said that he just went over to the settlement on the day that he heard that they had blocked the road.

another township, Thembiso Bhengu critiqued the tactics as too abrupt: 'Fazel [Khan]...is talking as if this is a union, but we are not workers, if you're in a company you can *toyi toyi* and come back to work in a few days. But if we move, we move for life, and what about the children who are going to school here?'. He qualified this with praise for everything else that had Khan had done, and these negotiating tactics were later criticised in a meeting of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, where people made it clear that there needed to be much more consultation before offers from the council could be accepted, and that things needed to move more slowly.

Interestingly, as these academics and lawyers are white or Indian, together with the solidarity (through joining in the later marches) of 'coloured' people from Wentworth and the Sydenham Heights municipal flats, the involvement of the middle class has introduced a multiracialism to the movement. I was unsure of how to generate more interesting discussion than to ask if they thought this multiracialism was a good thing, but everyone I interviewed did voice that feeling. System Cele did mention that the police had asked her, when they detained her after the Foreman Road rally, who all these whites and Indians were and why they were also protesting, with some fear.

### **Linking to the media**

Much of the 'fear' that the involvement of academics has introduced for the police and members of the government seems to have been through the media attention they have brought in or produced themselves. This attention has raised the profile of the movement to one known nationally, and appears to make protests the most effective tool in influencing municipal officials via the images broadcast of them later those nights.

Beginning with Pithouse's article mentioned before, he with others have written a series of pieces driven mostly by interviews with people in Kennedy Road that have been published in Durban's *Mercury*, the national *Mail and Guardian*, and the *Sunday Tribune*. These initial articles seem to have won over the sympathies of other journalists, who regularly called Zikode and other AbM activists for comment in a series of articles covering the announcements of the municipality's plans for a housing development for them in Phoenix East. A more recent article titled 'We are the Third Force'<sup>59</sup> by S'bu Zikode was reprinted in the celebrity and pop-culture magazines *Drum*, *Huisgenooit* and *YOU*, with a combined circulation of 5 million readers. Thus through media sympathy, people in Kennedy Road are increasingly able to tell their story in their own words.

And when they tell their story, commented Raj Patel, referencing Zikode's recent article in particular, it appeals to people for its narrative coherence and its

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<sup>59</sup> Zikode, S'bu. 'We are the Third Force'. *Drum Magazine*, 1 December 2005. See 'Interview with S'bu Zikode' 6 Nov 2005.

direct appeal to human experience. He likened it to Desmond Tutu's writing and to a sermon in the school of Christian humanism, using 'experience as the necessary grounds for action because the experience is so appalling'.<sup>60</sup> In this, he said, it differentiated itself from most writing from the Left, who tend to be the ones who write about other movements of the poor,<sup>61</sup> whose often reductive language of class struggle and bourgeois oppression already significantly narrows the complexity of what it can communicate and the audience it can effectively reach. He noted that the movement also benefited from a particular openness from some parts of the media to stories not necessarily favorable to the government. In particular, E-TV News, which has given sympathetic coverage to several of the protests, markets itself specifically as not sponsored by or connected to the government (as opposed to SABC). So in covering a recent report on the Foreman Road rally, they opened with a line to the effect of 'here are people who followed all the right channels, but the municipality denied them their right to protest'.<sup>62</sup> But SABC, the public broadcaster, has also covered the protests extensively, and recently invited Zikode to Johannesburg to talk about housing and slow-delivery for an hour-long programme in December 2005.

As one would expect, the people at Kennedy Road whom I interviewed were all very positive about this coverage, and, as noted before, mentioned with pride meeting people who recognised them (or at least their t-shirts) from television. I tried to explore why they thought the media coverage had been largely sympathetic to their cause, but this did not lead to many responses. Most people did not seem to expect anything other than sympathetic media coverage, perhaps because Kennedy Road had been under the radar of the media and of the public view for so long. Zikode did mention that he thought it was because 'people can now see our suffering', implying something of a snowball effect – the media coverage is sympathetic because the initial coverage showed their suffering sympathetically. But people were very aware of the power which the media holds, and the power that they now hold with the force of the media on their side. System Cele, like many others, remarked about how embarrassed the councilors must be for the whole country to see mock-funerals performed for them by their own constituencies. So while people were unsure as to why the media had portrayed their story as it had, they were clear that this had been an enormous boon for the settlement, both for personal dignity and in strategic terms.

Thus while the movement was catalyzed by a people's deep-seated frustration brought together for action by a democratically-elected committee with a

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<sup>60</sup> Interviewed 29 Nov 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this is because so few movements of the poor get to tell their stories in their own words, a point he also made.

<sup>62</sup> I watched the report, but did not record it, so this is only my best recollection.

culture of consulting the community, it has been sustained and has grown in force via connections with other settlements, with sympathetic members of the middle-class left, and by capturing the public imagination and embarrassing politicians through mass media. And the people in the settlement embrace all of these things, noting all that they have learned from other shack-dwellers and from the academics, and, more implicitly, feeling a new dignity won for themselves via their public visibility.

### **Movement directions**

But where do its members see this movement going? More recent marches have produced a series of negotiations with the municipality over housing, and the mayor recently announced a partnership with the private real estate developer Moreland for building mixed-income housing in Phoenix East, a township in Durban. Not surprisingly, this has been met with annoyance and anger from people at Kennedy Road and other informal settlements. Here again, they say that it feels like the municipality is making decisions for them without consulting them, and that there is perfectly good land in Clare Estate that could be developed which the municipality will not give them because they are not wealthy. In their words, this is business as usual: 'All the municipality does is talk politics, not about bringing development'<sup>63</sup> has become a part of the common language that people use. Even if it only 'talking politics', the municipality has taken much greater interest in Kennedy Road and in AbM these past few months, and this section will chart the trajectory of the movement and gauge people's views of the government.

#### *Engaging institutional politics – views and opportunities*

For all their disillusionment with politicians and what they see as their empty words, the movement will always be tied to these politics. Most everything that the movement is demanding – land, housing, electricity, water, and sanitation – must come directly from the government or at least be funded by it. In any analysis of the direction of the movement, then, gauging people's attitudes towards institutional politics and the movement's engagement with them proves crucial. Theorists of social movements concur: the notion of 'political opportunities' as shaping social movements is as old as the discipline of social movement theory. An honest appraisal of Kennedy Road and of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* critiques conventional theories of political opportunities, though, as Kennedy Road's struggle has not been passively shaped by these opportunities but has created many of its own.

Even a quick glance at the shacks or at the community hall covered with and sometimes held together by faded ANC stickers and posters reveals the settlement's political leanings. Each person whom I interviewed said that he or she is a

committed member of the ANC, and mentioned that most of the other people in the settlement were as well – some were even surprised that I would ask such a question. Some said that they had been members of the ANC, the ANC Youth League, or the UDF (United Democratic Front) during the 1980s and early 90s, and one cited the political violence then as the reason he had moved to the settlement. Accordingly, the settlement has voted solidly ANC in all the elections before the emergence of their struggle.<sup>64</sup>

Asked why they supported the ANC when their conditions had remained largely unchanged, most people emphasised that they were not protesting against the ANC or the government, but that they were protesting the councilor and the ‘laziness’ and unresponsiveness of people in the eThekweni municipality. Nonhlanhla Mzobe put it simply ‘The ANC is good, it’s the people’, but went on to say that the most local part of the ANC, of which she had been a part, was ‘all politics . . . they don’t care about development’.<sup>65</sup>

People seemed to accept that delivery would be slow – Mondli Mbiko is a realist, emphasising that ‘we have been oppressed for 300 years ... things are not going to change overnight’. What was most frustrating to S’bu Zikode was the *way* that the municipality operated, not its slow delivery. ‘We are not aiming at opposing the government’, he said, ‘but aiming at providing a *real* platform of togetherness – business, the government, and the poor. We are not expecting the government to feed us like children, we are willing to contribute whatever we can, but we need to demand that platform’, expressing the settlement’s desire to be consulted and informed. Put this same question, Cosmos Ngcobo’s analysis was that the national government was doing things reasonably well, and that Thabo Mbeki was a good man, but that the local arms of government were not doing enough to bring the concerns and needs of people in their districts to the attention of the provincial and national authorities. Many people said similar things – that the national and provincial governments were in good working order, but on local levels, councilors were not doing their job. Derrick Gwala speculated that this had likely happened because of money – people in the ANC were now paid too well to be in touch with the needs of the people. While they offered this as a general critique, this response almost certainly came out of their own experience with Councilor Baig. As they said it, it was the duty of the councilor to contact the other branches of government on behalf of his or her constituency, but that when they had asked him to do this, Baig had not. The settlement found out that this had happened only when they held their own meetings with higher-ranking officials in different government departments.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> However, all the settlements affiliated to Abahlali baseMjondolo boycotted the 1 March 2006 local government elections.

<sup>65</sup> Interviewed 10 Nov 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Specifically referenced was the provincial department of housing.



While many people's frustration was directed entirely towards the councilor – that he had promised them development and consistently forgotten these promises, that he had lied to them about the land and housing they would receive, and that he had lied to them about communicating their needs to the municipality and to the province – others had a sense of broader forces at work. Thembiso Bhengu talked about the way that the settlement lowered the real estate prices for the people living in formal houses in the neighborhood, and because they paid taxes, the councilors would work to serve these people more.<sup>67</sup> Tied to this (because the residents of these houses are mostly Indian), more people said they thought that it was racism – the councilor did not care about black people. System Cele and S'bu Zikode talk often of how the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer, and Zikode credits this to the government's economic policy. Cele attributes it to governments' general neglect of their citizens, particularly their poorest citizens, and talks of how this is happening all over South Africa and all over the world. But even those who speak of broader forces at work do not forget the view that everyone shares of the councilor: that he is a liar.

Since they have begun marching, people say, they have both exposed the councilor and circumvented him. Several people noted that where before they had meetings with the councilor (and that he often would not come), they now meet directly with city managers, with the mayor, and with the heads of departments – including housing. Thus far, most people said that this had been a far better experience. Derrick Gwala said that while he thought the councilor was a liar and would never keep his promises, that the mayor was not the same.<sup>68</sup> Others noted that these people were obviously more powerful and would be able to get things moving, and bring development, more quickly.

### *Negotiating the road ahead*

Though no one suggested this explicitly, it was clear that they had learned lessons from their interaction with the councilor that are now useful in their meetings with the mayor, Mlaba, and with other city managers. The movement now demands every promise in writing, along with a timeline for these projects to hold the city

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<sup>67</sup> He also talked about the privatisation of state-owned industries as making it harder to get employment.

<sup>68</sup> This could be because he has not had as much interaction with him. Mnikelo Ndabankulu said that Mayor Mlaba had come to Foreman Road and promised them land in the previous election (5 years ago) that has yet to be acted on. The march at Foreman Road – which was banned by the city – was to be on Mlaba's office, but this time not to demand his resignation but that he hear the people's demands and respond himself. Some Foreman Road residents took a far more negative view of Mlaba, however. After the march was banned by City Manager Mike Sutcliffe and the police had forcibly quarantined people in the settlement an effigy of Mayor Mlaba was burnt to great enthusiasm under the 'meeting tree'. Wines, Michael. 'Shantytown Dwellers in South Africa Protest the Sluggish Pace of Change'. *New York Times*, 25 December 2005.

accountable. And though in the current series of meetings with the municipality they have yet to do so, they hold the threat of protest out if the officials do not stay accountable to the promises that they make. And even without protests, the relationships they have forged with members of the media leave them other channels to hold the municipality to do what it says.

In this way, the movement creates 'political opportunities', rather than only being shaped by them, and has done so more effectively as its leaders have gained experience. Each protest that they have mounted has won some concessions – even small – from the government. After the first protest, the city cleaned several dozen toilets; after the September march, the city agreed to remove the settlement's waste and provide repairs and chairs for its community hall; as I conclude the writing of this paper the department of health has commissioned a crew of settlement residents to clean the remaining toilets for moderate pay. And while conditions are still bad, these concessions represent a fundamental shift from being forcibly removed to allowing them to stay. With this, the protests have brought more attention from the city, and have given the movement new access to the eThekweni political establishment. Currently the municipality has commissioned consultants to assess land in the Clare Estate area and has made verbal promises to build homes – not specifically on the sites where they are located – for several of the settlements in the AbM, but the outcomes of these talks are as yet unclear. What is clear, though, is the individual resolve of the people in the movement. Every single person I spoke to said 'we will not stop struggling till we get what we need', and a few even said that they would never stop struggling – that there will always be more people who need houses, and that even when they get houses, they will demand of the government 'the better life for all'<sup>69</sup> that they have been promised. The challenges will be maintaining the powerful hand that they hold with the municipality after the local elections (a conventionally theorised 'political opportunity') and maintaining the consultative culture that AbM has developed. They are in the process of drafting a constitution to this end, which I helped with briefly, a part of which stipulates that people remain involved even after their houses have been won,<sup>70</sup> though this will likely be difficult to enforce.

*Looking back: Connections with the 'first struggle'*

Perhaps the biggest political opportunity that people noted was the right to march in relative freedom and safety, which they often contrast thankfully with the marches a few of them participated in against apartheid. Any talk of struggle in South Africa

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<sup>69</sup> A perennial ANC campaign slogan.

<sup>70</sup> Even if constitutionally stipulated, this will be challenging. Recently, a settlement that had been involved in AbM, Quarry Road, stopped attending meetings after they were promised 100 houses in the city by Councilor Baig.

immediately harks to the struggle against apartheid, and I was interested to see how people saw apartheid – and the struggle against it – as informing the movement that they have catalyzed now. The consistent consensus from my interviews was that the struggle from Kennedy Road roots itself deeply in the struggle against apartheid, both in the way that people conceive its goals and the culture that they bring to it.

The first way that people would usually answer when asked how the struggles were connected was to refer to the similarity in goals. Many people said that the struggles were the same in that in both ‘we are fighting for our rights, for human rights’. Among those who said this, there was not agreement as to whether they were even different struggles. Some thought that struggle had been ongoing, others thought that it had been renewed or that this movement from Kennedy Road was completely new. Interestingly, the people most involved in the leadership of Kennedy Road’s protests and negotiations now consistently had the deepest sense of history – where others laughed at my question or said that they did not think about apartheid or the UDF anymore, those more involved seemed to remember it often. Many used this language of ‘partial victory’ over apartheid, some to mean that the struggle against apartheid had not been fully won, and that they needed to ‘win’ houses and land for people; others said more that the outcome of the negotiated settlement had not been fully satisfactory. Sibusiso Mzimela put this most eloquently: ‘The struggle versus apartheid has been a little bit achieved, though not yet, not in the right way. That’s why we’re still in the struggle, to make sure things are done right. We’re still on the road, we’re still grieving for something to be achieved, we’re still struggling for more’.<sup>71</sup>

Of those I interviewed, few discredited the importance of the struggle against apartheid – they saw how important it was in their current fight. Implicitly, people pointed to the struggle against apartheid as a necessary prerequisite to the work that they are doing now. For some this was as simple as the right to protest and the right to basically fair legal proceedings if they were arrested; others understood that the realisation of constitutional socioeconomic rights which they are now pushing for could not have been demanded under the old regime. On this point, T.N. Lembede is careful to note that the target of the current struggle is different as well. They are not fighting against the whole government, but against members of the municipality who ‘are lazy’ and have not served them well. Powerfully, they even liken Nelson Mandela to Jesus Christ, but put the poor people of the world as the next messiah<sup>72</sup> -- one who both points to the truth and redeems.

Along with a similarity in goals, the current movement has connected powerfully to the struggle against apartheid, consciously and subconsciously, in its culture. Many of the songs that they sing in protest are songs from the first struggle,

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<sup>71</sup> 29 Nov 2005

<sup>72</sup> S’bu Zikode quoted in Patel, Raj and Pithouse, Richard ‘The Third Nelson Mandela’. 2005.

with their lyrics reworked as necessary to fit the day and the message that they want to have heard Mnikelo Ndabankulu informed me that the song sung in a video that I took of the Foreman Road rally was directly from the UDF: '*yonk'indawo umzabalazo uyasiyumela*', or 'everywhere we have the right to struggle'. Even the very tactic of blocking a road with burning tires, people acknowledged, was borrowed directly from the anti-apartheid protest tactics. Anton Zamisa said, 'when I was out there on the road, I thought to myself, hey, this is like UDF'. Others did not think of it that way specifically – for many, living in KwaZulu-Natal, the struggle against apartheid had been more characterised by violence with Inkatha. For these people, they were quick to differentiate that apartheid had been fought against with violence and that they are fighting now for land, housing, and basic services by peaceful means.

One thing I was interested in was the literal 'cultural connection' – whether the culture they had experienced in the struggle against apartheid was the one they now employed in *Abahlali baseMjondolo*. Bheki Mncwango specifically said that he 'learned to struggle' through involvement with the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 1980s, and many of the older people who were not in the rural areas at the time said that they had also been involved, though no one else mentioned they had 'learned to struggle' this way. The element of 'struggle culture' that would seem most deeply connected are the links between the bottom-up, democratic workings of this movement and the similar culture ascribed to the UDF groups in the 1980s. Put this question, Ashwin Desai, a former UDF activist, doubted that this was the case – in KwaZulu-Natal, he said, the UDF in KwaZulu-Natal had been anything but 'bottom-up democracy'. He said that the organisational culture amongst the shack-dwellers movement is something entirely new to this area. My only other thought was that some of the AbM leaders involved in the UDF could have come from other areas where the democratic workings of that organisation had been more robust, as a few people did liken the organisational cultures of the movements.

Nevertheless, the struggle against apartheid clearly did provide a framework for the current struggle for its members – they were both for human rights, and they were both against suffering. Though not completely clear, to analogue these would also seem to legitimise what they are doing in the current struggle: the victory over apartheid is still the single most celebrated event in South African history, and in likening the current struggle to the first one, they take part in some of the same vindication that anti-apartheid activists now enjoy.

## Conclusions

As this analogy with the struggle against apartheid would reveal, the struggle at Kennedy Road has been as much for dignity and respect as it has been for the delivery of housing, land and basic services, even if the stories that people tell of the struggle do not reference this as often. Sometimes they make this push for dignity explicit, in calls for municipal officials to come and meet with them in the settlement, where they live, instead of at City

Hall and with analogies of the rising of the third Nelson Mandela—themselves. In other places it is less explicit, but the demand is no less strong. For as they march, they are marching for housing, for land, and against forced removals, but they are also marching to be seen – not only by curious tourists photographing them, but to be seen on their own terms. And though the settlement, and likely most of the people living there, has suffered great indignity, time observing one of the settlement’s meetings reveals the lives of people who still respect one another deeply. Perhaps the meetings are held so formally and everyone’s views are heard because they have not been extended the same respect from the municipality or from government, and the least they can do is confer this respect to one another. Pithouse comments that when they marched in May, perhaps the most defiant banner that they held was the one painted last – it simply read, ‘the University of Kennedy Road’, for this is as much a place of learning, as Derrick Gwala emphasises particularly, as any other.

And perhaps this human side is the deepest critique that the movement from Kennedy Road offers to theorists of social movements. Reading social movement theory in preparation for this research, one could only be struck by how detached much of it felt from the lives and experiences of people struggling. In this vein, most social movement theory seemed to emphasise social struggle as somehow apart from the struggle that people wage in their day-to-day lives: at Kennedy Road, to get one’s laundry to hang on the line without falling into the mud, to eke out an income to feed a family, and to fall asleep at night in a damp shack filled with insects. But these small, daily struggles animate the broader struggle that the settlement, with its partners, has mounted. Because it should not be a struggle to fall asleep at night, people wake up early the next morning to march; because people do not want their children to suffer the indignities that they have in order to find employment, they say that they will not stop struggling when they have gotten houses, or land, but only when their children can learn freely and meaningfully, when their lives feel full.

However as this paper has argued tacitly throughout its elaboration the most compelling aspect of the movement is that both the politics of the Kennedy Road settlement and now the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* movement embody, in their community, much of the way that they want to see the world work. This is their most powerful critique. At Kennedy Road, they create the space for even their poorest and least educated neighbors to offer their opinions, in hopes that the municipality will, in turn, create a space for the settlement’s voice to be heard. In *Abahlali baseMjondolo* meetings, they consult together and arrive at decisions in collaboration, in hopes that the municipality will consult with them over the future of their community and its surroundings. Most of all, the community organises itself to respond with concrete action to address the glaring desperation its most vulnerable face, perhaps in hope that the government will respond to the desperate conditions of these settlements. So when will they stop struggling? Perhaps when South African democracy looks the way democracy looks at Kennedy Road.

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7. Micah Kweyama – November 16, 2005
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18. Bheki Mpofana – November 28, 2005
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